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ABSTRACT

This brief addresses the declining presence of fathers in the rearing of their children, briefly discusses the circumstances through which fatherlessness occurs, describes current initiatives to address this problem, and suggests actions that Governors and other policymakers can take to facilitate greater involvement by fathers in the lives of their children. The brief suggests addressing the trend of fatherlessness on two levels: first, community based programs must reach out to low-income fathers and provide them with opportunities to learn how to appropriately care for their children; second, to achieve long-term results, such outreach efforts must be supported by a commitment to economic development to improve the education, skills, and employment prospects of individuals in disadvantaged communities. The following topics and programs are discussed: Background; Effective Intervention; The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization; The Parents' Fair Share Demonstration; Components of Successful Father Support Programs; and What Governors Can Do. (JBJ)

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Issue Brief

The Governors' Campaign for Children

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Toward Responsible Fatherhood*

Summary

This *Issue Brief* addresses the declining presence of fathers in the rearing of their children, briefly discusses the circumstances through which fatherlessness occurs, describes current initiatives to address this problem, and suggests actions that Governors and other policymakers can take to facilitate greater involvement by fathers in the lives of their children. The terms "fatherlessness" and "paternal disinvestment" are used interchangeably to mean an absence or decrease in a father's attention and support to his children.

The *Issue Brief* is one in a series of National Governors' Association (NGA) publications emphasizing the needs of young children and their families and what states can do to meet those needs. The series continues NGA's focus on improving conditions for young children initiated under the Governors' Campaign for Children.

Background

The deterioration of children's well-being over the past three decades is an urgent domestic concern. In all major categories of well-being—violent crime, neglect and abuse, test scores, and poverty—there is evidence that children are worse off now than they were just thirty years ago. Within this same timeframe, the number of children living with only one parent has risen dramatically, from 5.8 million to approximately 18 million; most of these children live apart from their fathers.[1] More and more studies are finding that in families in which fathers do not contribute their time and support, children are far more likely to endure multiple risk factors, such as drug and alcohol abuse, school failure, and teen pregnancy.

This trend of fatherlessness is occurring in cities, suburbs, and rural areas and among all racial and income groups. Most startling is the frequency and degree to which fathers in these families are not fulfilling their emotional and financial responsibilities to their children. Although many children from single-parent families grow up to be healthy, happy, and productive adults, mounting research indicates that children are generally better off when they are cared for and supported by two parents, whether or not both parents reside with their children.

Family disruption frequently reduces the economic resources available to a child. It is estimated that 75 percent of American children living in single-parent families will experience poverty before they turn eleven years old, compared with 20 percent of children in two-parent families.[2] To date, most policy discussions about fathers and families have focused primarily on the enforcement of child support payments. However, recent research indicates that even after controlling for the lost income

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caused by the father's absence, children reared in single-parent households fared significantly worse than children reared in households in which both parents were present.

Children need parents who play with them, spend time talking and reading to them, teach them how to relate to others, and set disciplinary limits. These activities and interactions help foster a child's development of essential communication and social skills. In addition, research indicates that it is the unique contributions of both mothers and fathers that encourage the development of trust and attachment. Such development can be hindered when a child is deprived of the attention, guidance, or love of one parent. In disrupted families, only one child in six saw his or her father as often as once a week in the past year; close to half of these children did not see their father at all in the past year. Visits became more infrequent over time, with almost two thirds of these children having no contact at all after ten years.[3] Paternal disinvestment may occur as a result of divorce, when a father leaves the home in which his child resides, or it may begin at conception, when an alliance between the unwed mother and the father often weakens or disintegrates.

Although some men avoid their responsibilities, many men are interested in contributing to rearing their children and supporting their families. Many fathers indicate that they see their children often and contribute what they can (e.g., diapers and milk). Existing research provides insight into why such attention and responsibility often wane and parents grow apart. Several researchers have concluded that a lack of employment opportunities, inadequate education, and little optimism for the future generate acute feelings of self-doubt and low self-esteem that preclude many men from entering committed relationships and remaining active in their children's lives. Others suggest that women are deterred from entering into relationships, or marriage, with the father of their child because the father may be unable to consistently provide for them. Still others maintain that men who never developed a strong identification with their own fathers are often handicapped in their effort to become committed fathers themselves. In each instance, there is a decrease in the attention children receive from both of their parents.

The trend of fatherlessness should be addressed on two levels. First, community-based programs must reach out to low-income fathers and provide them with opportunities to learn how to appropriately care for their children and to become employed. Second, to achieve long-term results, such outreach efforts must be supported by a commitment to economic development to improve the education, skills, and employment prospects of individuals in disadvantaged communities. This includes school reform, welfare reform that rewards both custodial and noncustodial parents for working, and ongoing initiatives to generate meaningful jobs in impoverished areas. In addition, efforts should be made to develop strategies to encourage divorced fathers to continue to support their children, both emotionally and financially.

Effective Interventions

As evidenced by the growing public awareness of the role of fathers in children's well-being, states and localities are beginning to experiment with strategies to promote unwed fathers' involvement in their children's lives. Although further research is necessary, the following two examples provide a framework for the development of initiatives to help fathers support their children. The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization, a Cleveland-based organization soon to be replicated in five additional cities, teaches fathers how to interact with and care for their children. The Parents' Fair Share project is designed to meet the employment and training needs of disadvantaged fathers and offers instruction on parenting skills.

The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization. This program targets young unwed fathers, many of whom have dropped out of school, are unemployed, and have a history of substance or alcohol abuse—risk factors that often minimize a father's commitment to his children. Men from the community, many of whom have successfully graduated from the program, act as outreach specialists to provide intense, nontraditional, one-on-one support, group support, instruction on fathering skills, health and nutrition information, medical and housing referrals, and education and career guidance. The program makes a special effort to help fathers learn vital aspects of childrearing, including how to change a diaper, prepare a bottle, keep their home safe for an infant, or talk to a daughter about dating.

The results from a preliminary evaluation of the Cleveland site by Case Western Reserve University are very promising. The study showed dramatic improvements in the amount of time the fathers spent with their children, enhanced relationships between parents, and higher educational achievement and greater rates of employment for the men. Most important, the participants learned to be good fathers.

The Parents' Fair Share Demonstration. Parents' Fair Share is a multistate demonstration administered by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation that works with noncustodial, unemployed parents who fail to make court-ordered child support payments. Because young fathers typically do not own property on which liens can be placed and imprisonment has not proven to be an effective deterrent, Parents' Fair Share is an innovative alternative for dealing with fathers who cannot, or do not, pay child support. The project helps fathers gain the skills they need to achieve gainful employment and economic self-sufficiency, with the expectation that they will use a portion of the increased earnings to pay long-term child support. The project has four components.

- *Employment and training*—education and skills training designed to help participants secure long-term employment at a wage level that will enable them to support themselves and their children.
- *Enhanced child support enforcement*—creative steps to increase support payments for children living in single-parent welfare households. Expedited paternity establishment and flexible rules allow child support orders to be reduced while noncustodial parents participate in Parents' Fair Share.
- *Peer Support*—education and support to fathers to improve their parenting abilities and facilitate their recognition of the importance of consistent, long-term child support.
- *Mediation*—opportunities for amicable solutions to differences between parents regarding visitation, child care, and finances.

Components of Successful Father Support Programs

The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization and Parents' Fair Share reflect important building blocks for innovative state initiatives to address paternal disinvestment. The following strategies, utilized by these two programs and other similar programs, can serve as a foundation for new approaches to help fathers learn how to care for their children and provide economic security for their family.

Parenting skills. Fathers need to learn how to responsibly care for, play with, and discipline children in order to gain confidence in their parenting abilities.

Education and training. To make long-term contributions to the welfare of their children, fathers need to improve their employment prospects.

Recruitment. Outreach workers familiar with a community should knock on doors, organize meetings, as well as involve schools, community and health agencies, preschool programs, and social services agencies to find fathers who could benefit from support services.

Creative Payment Alternatives. Efforts should be made to arrange a flexible child support payment plan so fathers pay what they are able and, as their income rises, proportionately increase financial support.

Paternity establishment. This step legally establishes the bond between fathers and their children and allows their children access to child support, Social Security, and workers' compensation.

Respect. Involvement in social services systems can be confusing and demoralizing. All individuals develop self-respect and devise solutions when they are listened to and treated with respect.

Staff selection. Program staff should share the culture, language, and background of the target population.

Responsiveness. Programs must help parents solve a variety of problems as they arise and should coordinate needed referrals.

Parental mediation. Mothers should be consulted on any activity that involves their children, have input into designing better solutions for visitation and payment arrangements and, if possible, should attend support sessions with fathers.

Consistency. Support relationships should be one-on-one and, if possible, should be maintained for at least a year.

What Governors Can Do

Governors can take a variety of steps to increase public awareness of the importance of children being cared for and supported by both of their biological parents.

- Governors can promote an "alternative currency" approach to child support. Unemployed fathers could be permitted to substitute babysitting or homework assistance for financial support. This approach has been piloted in Marion County, Indiana, where fathers can reduce their support payments through in-kind contributions.
- Governors can support new priorities for divorce settlements. These might include a rule that the best possible package of benefits, income, and services for the children be considered before any decisions are made about the division of assets between the parents.
- Governors can develop incentives that encourage paternal involvement and marriage. For example, New Jersey exempts the income of the spouse when a custodial parent marries while receiving public assistance.
- Governors can facilitate measures to provide additional education and information to the courts and all level of governments on the importance of fathers participating in the raising of their children.
- Governors can support efforts that encourage and facilitate paternity establishment. For example, states could implement a hospital-based paternity establishment system or, as Michigan has done, could decriminalize paternity establishment and make it a civil process.

- Governors can propose legislation that establishes a process to garnish the wages of noncustodial working parents and pass the payments along to custodial parents or, as Maine has done, that revokes drivers' licenses as a disincentive to nonpayment of child support.
- Governors can encourage reforms that make the work place more "father-friendly." For example, fathers as well as mothers should have the opportunity to take leave when their child is born.
- Governors can foster the establishment of mandatory classes to educate parents who divorce or enter into child support agreements on the ways in which divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing put children at risk.
- Governors can propose a work requirement for noncustodial and custodial parents as an element of welfare reform. Kansas now requires both parents to register for work or participate in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training program.
- Governors can replicate the efforts of Governor Pete Wilson of California, who recently sponsored a Fathers Summit. Governor Wilson convened public, private, and community leaders to focus public attention on the societal impacts of father absence in child rearing and to galvanize support for solutions.
- Governors can convene town meetings designed to reach out to single women to obtain their perspectives on father responsibility and involvement.
- Governors can encourage popular male personalities—musicians, athletes, or actors—to speak out on the importance of fatherhood and serve as models of committed fathers.
- Governors can encourage classes to educate students on the risks associated with family breakup, father absence, and teenage parenting.
- Governors can convene a conference of both educators and frontline staff from other human resources agencies to stress the importance of reaching out to fathers as well as mothers to update them on the progress of their children and involve them in social or educational activities.

Whenever possible, children require the love and attention of both parents. Governors and other policymakers can increase public awareness of this vital need and support initiatives that help fathers fulfill their responsibilities to their children.

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[1] Wade Horn, *Father Facts* (Lancaster, Pa.: National Fatherhood Initiative, 1995), p. iii.

[2] National Fatherhood Initiative, *America's Children: What Do They Have Left When the Fathers Are Gone* (Lancaster, Pa.: National Fatherhood Initiative, 1995).

[3] Horn, 20.

***Editor's Note**: This *Issue Brief* was prepared by Jordan Meranus, an intern at NGA. He holds a master's degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and is a co-founder of Jumpstart for Young Children Inc. Jumpstart is a nonprofit organization that provides preschoolers who are at serious risk of school failure with a one-to-one relationship with a college student to foster the children's social and cognitive development. Shari Canter, an intern at NGA from Indiana University, helped compile data and articulate the issues.